

Solemn opening address - President of the European Parliament Roberta Metsola

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With their talent, their devotion, their love for their country, they have been contributing to a vibrant Afghan society and culture. Now, they are being humiliated, they are starving, they are sold like merchandise. They are banned from education. They are erased from public life. Their very lives are threatened.

Many were driven into exile. Most, however, could not escape. They are now looking with fear and despair into their future. Yet, they continue fighting for it.

Yet, they still sustain hope.

Hope in Afghanistan, a country lying along historic trading routes, sought for centuries as a prize by empire builders and armies; each leaving traces of their efforts. And each leaving ruins.

Hope in humanity's ability to build a better future, in spite of the fact that the situation for women and girls in Afghanistan, following the Taliban's return to power last year, is extremely worrying.

Dear honourable guests,

Dear Members, dear colleagues,

Honoured Afghan Women,

I warmly welcome you to the European Parliament's Afghan Women Days.

We hold this event to give Afghan women and girls a voice, in our House, and to honour and support the human rights work achieved by the 2021 Afghan Women finalists for the Sakharov Prize, whom fortunately for us will participate with us, today and tomorrow, in discussions about the situation of Afghan women. Together, we will seek ways to help both those on the ground and those who have been forced to flee from their homes.

These prominent Afghan women and influencers will share their message about how they work tirelessly to build an equal, more inclusive Afghan society.

I reiterate this House's support to Afghan women, both in their country and abroad.

We will listen, we will learn and we will act.

The Taliban had promised a change from their first period of rule. A change that respected women's rights. They promised no "animosity". However, what we are witnessing is a change from a thriving society, to one in free fall.

As we speak, a humanitarian catastrophe is unfolding in Afghanistan. With the Taliban seizing power, the human rights situation in the country deteriorated drastically, especially for women and girls. Years of progress in gender equality, gains for women and girls, their access to education, healthcare and participation in civic and political life, have been abandoned in favour of further deprivation and subjugation.

With their actions, the Taliban prevent women's meaningful participation in society. We see violent crackdown on peaceful demonstrations, systematic gender-based discrimination, disappearance of women activists and the silencing of journalists.

Our Parliament has taken a very clear stance on this. In a recent resolution, we insist that the right to education and employment, freedom from gender-based violence, the protection of fundamental rights of women, access to healthcare and participation in decision-making must be key demands of the international community directed at the de-facto rulers of Afghanistan.

These are not just goals and values that we, in the European Union, hold dear. These are universal goals of human dignity.

The European Union has defined respect for human rights, in particular women's rights, the rule of law and freedom of the media as key conditions for engagement with the current Afghan authorities.

Facing the dire humanitarian situation, the European Parliament supports the creation of humanitarian corridors for the provision of food, water, sanitation and medication to the people of Afghanistan. We also reiterate that the immediate needs of Afghan women and girls need to be prioritised in the context of humanitarian aid.

Our commitments are to the people of Afghanistan and not to its rulers.

We also stress the need to ensure that women and young girls who have left Afghanistan can continue their education in other countries. We encourage the development of innovative ways to empower Afghan women, including by providing scholarships to study at European schools and universities.

I look forward to this very creative programme of these Afghan Women Days. Like the graffiti work of Shamsia Hassani, like the songs of Aryana Sayeed, like the photographs of Fatimah Hossaini, they reflect the fear but also the strength, the hopes and the beauty of Afghan women.

During these Afghan Women Days, we, the European Parliament, are here to show our solidarity with Afghan women parliamentarians and Afghan women artists, journalists and activists in exile, to help them raise their voices higher.

We will hear your testimonies.

Your work, your films, your music teach us, that although there is a time for weeping, there is also a time for standing up against injustice.

Your resilience is more than exemplary. You are an inspiration to me and you are an inspiration to everyone.

It fills me with optimism to see you all, dear colleagues, also committed to participate jointly in Afghan Women Days. The women and girls of Afghanistan deserve respect of their dignity and of their fundamental rights.

And let me assure you that you can count on this European Parliament to help make that a reality.

Thank you for coming to share with us, it truly is an honour.